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Licensed to Teach

How will state licensing of yoga schools affect yoga teachers and their businesses?

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By Molly M. Ginty



As they geared up with excitement to launch their second teacher training, Ananda Ashram administrators never expected that the state would derail their plans.

"In April, two weeks before we were supposed to welcome 10 trainees, we received an unexpected letter saying we had to suspend our program immediately or face fines of up to \$50,000," says Jennifer Schmid, codirector of Ananda's School of Hatha Yoga. "New York State said we had to finish a monthlong licensing process that required exhaustive paperwork, site inspections, and new course protocols. People were all set to come to our four-week, live-in, intensive training. But we had to cancel it at the last minute, refund the students' money, and postpone it indefinitely."

Demands that yoga teacher training be state approved are upsetting the peace not only at Ananda Ashram—an 84-acre refuge of rolling hills and pine trees in Monroe, New York—but at yoga schools across the United States. This controversial push doesn't affect regular teachers' standing today, and state officials say it likely won't in the future, insisting that instructors with established certification should not be impacted by newer teachers having state-approved vocational training. Even so, every yoga instructor should know about these requirements, and every instructor who trains teachers should be prepared to face them.

According to Patricia Kearney, a health and exercise science instructor at Bridgewater College in Bridgewater, Virginia, such requirements are being enforced in at least 14 states: Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin; New York is now in limbo over regulation due to a push-back from yoga teachers there. "Regulating yoga training programs—like regulating vocational schools—is becoming standard practice in a growing number of states," says Kearney. "Some states require that a program be of a certain size before it must be licensed or certified. Some states have low one-time fees for this; some have high, repeated fees; and some require an initially low fee but renewal fees that are double the original amount."

Though laws that govern vocational and training programs have been on the books since as early the 1930s, states didn't start enforcing them at yoga training schools until 2004, when Wisconsin kicked off the trend. "We wanted to make sure that yoga schools, like other training programs, were financially stable and had a solid set of rules governing how they operated," says Patrick Sweeney, a Wisconsin licensing official. "Eventually, other state consumer protection agencies decided to follow in our footsteps."

Most states base their regulation requirements on guidelines from the Yoga Alliance, an Arlington, Virginia-based nonprofit that helps the industry regulate itself.

"When we formed in 1999, we decided to recommend that instructors have 200 hours of training, including philosophy, anatomy, physiology, and study of the poses," says Mark Davis, the president of Yoga Alliance. "Those guidelines were meant to be entirely voluntary. But some unethical yoga teacher trainers went into the business and, in response, states started approaching the 1,000 schools in our online registry and asking them to prove they followed our guidelines and undergo formal licensing."

As yoga regulation spreads, what do teacher training operators need to know? Experts following this trend recommend taking the four following steps:

Know the Ropes

"Find out exactly what your state requires now or is planning to require in the future," says Becca Hewes, who offers teacher training at YogaLife in Norman, Oklahoma, and who recently finished the licensing process. You may need to create a course catalog; obtain financial bonding; pass a site inspection; create a business plan; and establish policies for absences, cancellations, and refunds. This could take several weeks to several months and require fees ranging from \$250 to \$2,500—excluding extras such as the \$800 that Hewes had to spend on an accountant and new exit signs.

Know the Process

Schools that are already regulated say the exhaustive process does have an upside. "We hated going through this, but the finished product is just amazing," says Gusti Ratliff, founder of the Divine School of Yoga Therapy in Southlake, Texas. "We now have comprehensive, clear-cut rules that protect our trainees and us, too." Like the Divine School's cozy space—a haven of soft music, herbal teas, and sun-flooded practice rooms—its certification, according to Ratliff, makes it more reputable in the eyes of its trainees.

Consider the Costs

Given the time and money required to get licensed, running a teacher training program could threaten your studio's bottom line—especially if the studio is small, just starting out, already squeezed by the recession, or facing especially high fees. Rather than jeopardize their financial security, some yoga schools are reconsidering whether they should even offer teacher training, which can cost students \$2,000 to \$5,000 but can leave studios barely breaking even.

"Here in New York, one bill before the state legislature would exempt yoga schools from licensing, and another would require it for a fee of \$5,000," says Swami Ramananda, president of the Integral Yoga Institute. "If the second bill passes, it's hard to imagine that we would cancel teacher training, which is part of our spiritual mission and comprises 15 percent of our revenue. But continuing our program—even though it's of long standing and is well respected—could prove to be too expensive for our students, and financially problematic for us."

Join the Debate

"Some people feel that yoga shouldn't have any regulations because of its spiritual and philosophical origins, while others feel that this is a necessary business practice," says Yoga Alliance's Davis. Regardless of whether regulation is required in your state, consider reaching out to other teacher trainers and sparking a discussion. You may find yourself part of a growing resistance movement, such as that led by the Yoga Association of New York, which is fighting local licensing—and its proposed \$5,000 fee. Or you may find yourself sharing tips with already-regulated schools about how to make the process go more smoothly.

"Regulation isn't easy," says Debbie Williamson, who owns Midwest Power Yoga in Appleton, Wisconsin, and licensed it in 2004. "But if we support each other as peers, we can help each other through this—and ultimately improve the field of yoga."

Molly M. Ginty is a health writer who teaches yoga at Bayview Correctional Facility in New York City.